

Attack on U.S. Soldiers in Niger: Context and Issues for Congress

October 5, 2017

On October 4, [four](#) members of U.S. Special Operations Forces were killed and two wounded in an attack in western Niger, an emerging hot spot of Islamist extremist activity. The Defense Department (DOD) stated in a [briefing on October 5](#) that the U.S. servicemembers were “conducting an advise and assist mission” with local counterparts, several of whom were also killed. The identity of perpetrators has not been confirmed. The incident has [highlighted](#) evolving security threats in West Africa’s Sahel region, as well as the growing presence of U.S. military forces engaged in counterterrorism support in Africa. The situation in Niger poses issues for Congress pertaining to oversight of U.S. policy toward fragile states in the Sahel, U.S. security assistance and foreign aid, and U.S. counterterrorism activities abroad.

If an Islamist armed group was responsible, as some [reports suggest](#), this would be the first known incident in which such a group has killed U.S. soldiers on active duty in the Sahel. Western civilians, including several U.S. citizens, have died, however, in a recent series of mass-casualty attacks by Islamist extremists in regional capitals. The first reported prolonged [hostage-taking of an American citizen](#) by an Islamist group in the Sahel occurred in Niger in October 2016, underscoring the changing threat landscape.

Security Environment

News reports [indicate](#) that the attack occurred near the town of Tongo Tongo (see **Figure 1**), in a border region where a number of armed groups are active. These include locally led factions affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State organization, ethnic militias, separatist rebels, drug traffickers, smugglers, and bandits, with the lines between these categories [often blurred](#). (See CRS In Focus IF10172, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Related Groups*.)

Islamist armed groups regularly conduct attacks against local targets—notably focusing on government officials, prisons, schools, and individuals accused of collaborating with the state or with French-led counterterrorism operations—and [against U.N. peacekeepers in Mali](#). Some analysts assert that the often heavy-handed counterterrorism approach of local security forces has contributed to [worsening instability](#).

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Figure 1. Niger at a Glance

Population: 19.2 million

Size: slightly less than twice the size of Texas

Languages: French (official), Hausa, Djerma

Ethnic Groups: Hausa 53.1%, Djerma/Songhai 21.2%, Tuareg 11%, Fulani (Peul) 6.5%, Kanuri 5.9%, Gurma 0.8%, Arab 0.4%, Tubu 0.4%, other/unavailable 0.9% (2006 est.)

Religions: Muslim 80%, Christian and indigenous beliefs 20%

Median Age: 15.3 years

Life Expectancy: 55.5 years

Fertility Rate: 6.5 children (world's highest)

Infant Mortality: 82.8 deaths/1,000 live births

Adult Literacy: 19% (male 27%, female 11%) (2015 est.)

Adult HIV/AIDS Prevalence: 0.4%

GDP Growth: 4.6%

GDP Per Capita: \$411

Key Exports: uranium ore, livestock, cowpeas, onions

Key Imports: foodstuffs, machinery, vehicles and parts, petroleum, cereals

Top Trading Partners: France, Nigeria, China (2015)

Sources: Graphic by CRS. Map generated by Hannah Fischer using data from Department of State (2016); Esri (2016); National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (2017). Figures from CIA, *The World Factbook*, and International Monetary Fund; 2016 estimates unless otherwise noted.

Niger faces similar but distinct security threats in the southeastern district of Diffa, bordering Nigeria, where the Islamist extremist group Boko Haram is active, and in the north, which borders Libya. Niger is also a key transit point for African [migrants](#) seeking to reach Europe via Libya and the Mediterranean.

Niger's government seeks to work with other countries in the region to counter terrorism and has welcomed outside assistance, including from Western militaries. Its troops participate in a Nigeria-led Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to counter Boko Haram. Five Sahel countries known as the G-5, including Niger, have proposed a similar joint force to pursue Mali-based terrorist groups and enhance border security, for which they have [called for greater donor support](#). Troops from Niger have also partnered closely with [Operation Barkhane](#), France's 4,000-troop counterterrorism operation in the Sahel, which was launched in 2014 following France's military intervention against Islamist groups in [Mali](#).

U.S. Military Presence

Niger hosts one of the largest numbers of U.S. troops in Africa. In June, the White House [reported to Congress](#) that some 645 U.S. military personnel were stationed there to support counterterrorism operations by “African partners.” More [recent news reports](#) have cited 800.

These figures show a significant increase since 2013, when President Obama [announced the deployment](#) of about 100 military personnel to Niger for regional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations. This trend has coincided with [sizable increases in U.S. security assistance](#) for African countries over the past decade, of which Niger has been a major beneficiary. In addition to conducting security assistance and cooperation activities in Niger and neighboring states, the U.S. military also provides [logistical and intelligence support](#) to France’s Operation Barkhane.

The growing foreign military footprint in the country appears to have fed [local backlash](#) against both the government and Western countries. Some observers have [raised concerns](#) about plans to move U.S. ISR operations to a new [Air Force-constructed](#) base near the volatile northern city of Agadez.

U.S. Assistance

U.S. engagement with Niger is focused on counterterrorism and food security assistance. Congress has helped shape U.S.-Niger relations and the U.S. footprint on the ground through its authorization and appropriation of funds for foreign aid, security cooperation, and military construction.

Over the past 15 years, the State Department has sought to build the capacity of Niger’s security forces for counterterrorism and peacekeeping, largely through regional initiatives funded under the Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) account. DOD has separately allocated approximately \$165 million in counterterrorism equipment and training for Niger since FY2006, making Niger the second-largest recipient of such assistance in Africa, according to CRS analysis of congressional notifications. As part of efforts to pair growing security assistance with greater support for Niger’s development, the Obama Administration concluded a \$437 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact agreement with Niger in 2016 to help strengthen its agriculture sector.

Outlook

Niger is one of the [poorest countries in the world](#). Military coups (most recently in 2010), ethnic rebellions, and food security crises have been recurrent challenges. Niger is a multiparty democracy, but elections in 2016 were marred by the imprisonment of the top opposition candidate and an opposition boycott. The U.S. organization Freedom House [asserts](#) that Niger’s security challenges have “served as an alibi” for the administration of President Mahamadou Issoufou “to restrict freedoms and civil liberties.”

Given this context, some observers have questioned whether Niger can absorb and sustain rapid increases in external military assistance, whether U.S. security investments can be maintained amid political uncertainty, and whether U.S. responses to near-term security challenges are having an impact on the medium-term stability and democratic trajectory of African counterterrorism partners. The threat environment may also raise questions about U.S. military rules of engagement and force protection.

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